

# Public Safety Radio Interoperability

## 2002 - 2003 Grand Jury Report

### I. Reason for Investigation

The Solano County Grand Jury identified a serious problem that currently exists within Solano County concerning the public safety radio and communication systems. These systems operate independently with no coordination and little interoperability among police, fire and medical agencies.

### II. Procedure

The Grand Jury:

- Discussed issue during its annual visit to Police Departments
- Visited the Sheriff's Office and subsequently received a letter from the Sheriff concerning radio interoperability
- Interviewed Solano County General Services Communications Manager
- Conducted a "Survey of Law Enforcement" with all law enforcement agencies in Solano County
- Attended a monthly meeting of the Solano County Police Chiefs' Association
- Reviewed a document dated February 23, 2003, on "Public Safety Interoperability" issued by the Public Safety Working Group of Solano County
- Reviewed a copy of the consultant contract issued to RCC Consultants, Inc. on October 1, 2002

### III Background

1. Based on discussions and information received from law enforcement personnel, the Sheriff's Office and the Solano County General Services Communications Manager, the Grand Jury was made aware of a fragmented communications system that presently exists in Solano County. This communication system restricts effective emergency communication between local law enforcement and emergency service providers.

2. The Benicia Police Department, Dixon Police Department, Suisun City Police Department, Vallejo Police Department and the Sheriff's Office presently operate within a range of frequencies that provides a less than acceptable level of inter-agency communication. The Vacaville Police Department and the Fairfield Police Department are using a different technology which eliminates their ability to communicate directly with other law enforcement agencies. The Rio Vista Police Department contracts with Contra Costa County for law enforcement communications services which also eliminates their ability to communicate directly with other law enforcement agencies. The Grand Jury was informed that local fire departments operate with a similarly fragmented system, which in many cases, prevents inter-agency communications among fire services. Thus, the existing emergency communications system will not be effective in the event of a catastrophic event or a major incident.

3. In 1994, a contract in the amount of \$65,000 was issued to a consulting firm (The Warner Group) to study and report on the following areas:

- Radio Interoperability through shared frequencies - To move away from the various platforms currently used to common frequencies allowing voice and data transmissions in a coordinated fashion
- Enhancing data sharing through integrated Computer Aided Dispatch and Records Management Systems (CAD-RMS) - To utilize existing and planned technology structures, especially CAD-RMS
- The consolidation or reorganizing of safety dispatching - To move away from placing individual Public Safety Answering Points (Dispatch Centers) at different municipal or County sites, toward a consolidation of dispatch centers into one or two regional entities

4. The Warner Group's study determined a project to resolve the noted concerns was feasible, and that it would be best approached if conceived as three interrelated efforts:

- Enhancing data sharing through integrated CAD-RMS - To utilize existing and planned technology structures to allow sharing of data, reports and related public safety information amongst participating agencies
- Radio Interoperability through shared frequencies - To move to common radio frequencies to allow for voice and data transmissions in a coordinated fashion
- The consolidation or reorganization of public safety dispatching - To move toward a consolidation of dispatch centers in one or two regional entities

5. No significant changes recommended in the above study were implemented.

6. Under the direction of the city managers and the County Administrator, a work group was formed in 2001 to address the incompatibility of the various radio systems within Solano County and to identify funding options for a new communications system. The work group consists of police chiefs, fire chiefs, representatives from County fire districts, Emergency Medical Services Division of Health and Social Services, Sheriff's Office and the Health and Social Services Department of General Services.

The work group developed the following three objectives for public agencies in Solano County:

- An interoperable radio communications system
- Consolidation of dispatch centers
- Integration of data networks

7. The work group determined that a consultant should be hired to conduct a county-wide needs assessment, provide a high-level conceptual radio system design and study the feasibility of a Joint Powers Agreement for Solano County. A contract in the amount of \$109,477 was issued to RCC Consultants Inc. on October 1, 2002. This study is due to be completed in June 2003.

8. A dispatch center receives and provides local 911 emergency services for police and fire departments. A full functional dispatch center, in addition to providing local police and fire emergency services, provides emergency services to other outside agencies (e.g. rural fire districts, irrigation districts, etc.). The Grand Jury noted that each law enforcement agency operates or contracts out dispatch services. The Fairfield Police Department, Suisun City Police Department and the Sheriff's Office each operates and maintains separate dispatch centers within a one-and-one-half mile radius of one another. The cities of Vallejo and Benicia have a similar situation, each operating a dispatch center in a relatively close proximity to each other. The City of Dixon contracts with the Sheriff's Office for full-time dispatch services. The City of Suisun City has its own dispatch center. In addition, it contracts with the Sheriff's Office for late-night hour dispatch. The City of Vacaville operates its own independent dispatch center and the City of Rio Vista contracts to Contra Costa County for their dispatch services. None of the County or city fire departments operate or maintain a dispatch center. All dispatch services for fire are provided by the law enforcement dispatch centers.

9. Testimony indicates that with increasing population growth, independent dispatch centers are no longer efficient. The employees' salary cost to operate independent dispatch centers is high based on the data supplied by the local law enforcement agencies. This data was received in response to the 2002 - 2003 Solano County Grand Jury "Survey of Law Enforcement." (See Attachment)

10. The average value of the minimum and maximum salaries for Level I dispatchers was calculated for the six agencies operating independent dispatch centers. Using the median monthly salary of \$3,648 multiplied by the 88 authorized dispatchers for these agencies equals \$321,024 per month. On an annualized basis, the basic salaries for the six agencies are \$3,852,288. The over-time cost shown in Attachment for 2001-2002 for these agencies was \$260,679. Vallejo and Benicia over-time costs for dispatchers are not shown separately as they are included in the department overtime charges. Dixon and Rio Vista, who contract out their dispatch services, reported a yearly combined cost of \$128,060. Thus the total cost for Level I dispatching services in the County came to at least \$4,241,027 for Fiscal Year 2001 - 2002. This figure does not include senior or supervisory personnel, employee benefits or overhead expenses.

11. Testimony expressed concern that ownership of any form of consolidated dispatch centers is going to become a significant obstacle to consolidation. An argument heard by the Grand Jury was that a consolidated approach to provide dispatch services would not work because dispatchers would not have local area knowledge. While local area knowledge is often desirable, the availability of advanced technology today has minimized the need for geographic familiarity. Several cities in the County currently contract out police and fire dispatch services with no identified degradation of services. Testimony concerning the existing shortage of dispatchers indicates a consolidated approach for dispatching services would eliminate the current practice among local agencies of competing against one another for a limited number of employable candidates. Further testimony indicated that there are a number of significant issues that would need to be resolved prior to establishing a consolidated dispatch center(s) for Solano County; however, none of these issues are insurmountable.

12. The Warner Group Report issued in 1994 studied full consolidation extensively. Their assessment at the time was that it was feasible to consolidate the dispatch centers. The cost recovery would be six to eight years from the start-up date.

#### IV. Findings and Recommendations

*Each finding is referenced to the background paragraph number*

**Finding # 1** - The radio communication system presently used throughout Solano County prevents effective emergency communication between local emergency providers. (1,2,8)

**Recommendation # 1A** – A coordinated radio communication system be implemented within Solano County to allow interoperability between public safety agencies.

**Recommendation # 1B** - A permanent Joint Powers Authority be formed to oversee, coordinate and implement the emergency communication needs of Solano County. The Joint Powers Authority should consist of representatives from:

- Solano County
- Solano Emergency Medical Services Cooperative
- The Cities of Benicia, Dixon, Fairfield, Rio Vista, Suisun City, Vacaville, and Vallejo
- All Fire Districts within Solano County
- Solano Community College Police Department.
- Solano County Office of Emergency Services

**Finding # 2** – Consolidation of dispatch centers would be more efficient and provide a significant overall cost savings. (9, 10, 11)

**Recommendation # 2** – A plan be formulated to implement two regional dispatch services in Solano County. This would provide a back-up in case one center becomes temporarily inoperable.

#### V. Comments

At the time this report was written, Solano County had entered into a consulting contract with RCC Consultants, Inc. to address the issues noted in this report. The consultant's final report is scheduled to be issued by June 30, 2003.

Each of the law enforcement agencies currently operating independent dispatch centers exercises and enjoys control of their dispatch services. The failure of the County to have previously implemented radio interoperability and dispatch consolidation reflected parochial interests that still exist. Support has been noted by numerous affected agencies but the ability to replace the existing systems is dependent on support of the Board of Supervisors and the City Councils.

Implementation of the radio interoperability recommendation will also significantly benefit the County Emergency Operations Center in the event of its activation. (See report on Standardized Emergency Management Systems)

## Affected Agencies

- Solano County Administrator
  - Solano County Sheriff's Office
  - Solano County Department of General Services
  - City of Benicia City Manager
  - Benicia Police Department
  - Benicia Fire Department
  - City of Dixon City Manager
  - Dixon Police Department
  - Dixon Fire Department
  - City of Fairfield City Manager
  - Fairfield Police Department
  - Fairfield Fire Department
  - City of Rio Vista City Manager
  - Rio Vista Police Department
  - Rio Vista Fire Department
  - City of Suisun City - City Manager
  - Suisun City Police Department
  - Suisun City Fire Department
  - City of Vacaville City Manager
  - Vacaville Police Department
  - Vacaville Fire Department
  - City of Vallejo City Manager
  - Vallejo Police Department
  - Vallejo Fire Department
  - Solano Community College Police Department
  - Solano County Office of Emergency Services
  - East Vallejo Fire Protection District
  - Cordelia Fire Protection District
  - Suisun Fire Protection District
  - Montezuma Fire Protection District
  - Dixon Fire Protection District
  - Vacaville Fire Protection District
  - Ryer Island Fire Protection District
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**SOLANO COUNTY GRAND JURY  
LAW ENFORCEMENT SURVEY**

<b>Agency</b>	<b>Sheriff Dept.</b>	<b>Vallejo P.D.</b>	<b>Fairfield P.D.</b>	<b>Vacaville P.D.</b>	<b>Benicia P.D.</b>	<b>Suisun City P.D.</b>	<b>Dixon P.D.</b>	<b>Rio Vista P.D.</b>
Dispatchers Authorized #	17	23	17	16	10	5	Contracts with Sheriffs Dept.	Contracts with Contra Costa Co.
Dispatchers Salary Range \$ / month								
Minimum	\$3199.	\$3334.	\$3405.	\$3645.	\$3368.	\$2659.		
Maximum	\$3889.	\$4053.	\$4138.	\$4430.	\$4093.	\$3563.		
Lead/Supv/Sr								
Salary Range \$ / month								
Minimum	\$3471.	\$4062.	\$3758.	N/A	\$4244.			
Maximum	\$4671.	\$4937.	\$4568.	N/A	\$5158.			
Total OT \$ FY 2001-2002	\$69,942.	Included in Dept. OT	\$74,571.	\$98,000.	Included in Officer OT	\$18,166.		
Contracted Out \$ Per Year							\$97,000.	\$31,060.